Briefing for the Petitions Committee

Research Briefing: Building Resilience to Cyber-Bullying in Children

Petition number: P5-05-752

Petition title: Building Resilience to Cyber-Bullying in Children

Text of petition:

We petition the Welsh Government to fund and undertake evidence based research, and produce a strategy with recommendations for building resilience in our children – from infancy – against the devastating effects of Cyber-Bullying.

The strategy should include advice for parents and schools as to:

- how to create healthy views and relationships around social media
- how to prepare children to identify and guard against the behaviours that cyber-bullies use
- how to teach children to emotionally separate their online experiences from their 'real life' ones
- how to build emotional resilience to personal attacks online.

Background

Legal duties

Every school in Wales is subject to a legal duty to ensure that any form of bullying, is dealt with effectively. There is a range of legislation applicable to Wales that aims to protect children and young people from abuse, including bullying. Existing legislation with relevance to bullying includes: *Equality Act 2010*; *Education and Inspections Act 2006*; *Children Act 2004*; *Education Act 2002*; *Government of Wales Act 1998*; *Human Rights Act 1998*.

Guidance

In Wales this legislation is supported by **Welsh Government guidance and circulars**. These do not directly impose legal duties, but give guidance to local authorities and schools on how to implement bullying policies on a day to day basis. The guidance is intended to support the discharge of the legal duties.

The Welsh Government's *Respecting Others: Anti-bullying Guidance: Circular 23/03* states that **headteachers and governing bodies must, by law, have a policy to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils**. The circular sets out the types of information that should be included within a school's policy and how schools can tackle bullying.

It sets out a whole school bullying policy into four stages:

- Stage 1 – Awareness raising and consultation;
- Stage 2 – Implementation;
- Stage 3 – Monitoring;
- Stage 4 – Evaluation.

The circular also sets out that a senior member of staff should oversee the policy; that there is a regular renewal of the principles of the policy to remind both pupils and staff; and that the **school governing body should review the policy on an annual basis** to ensure that it is effective. The circular states that:

> It is good practice to give a senior teacher the overall responsibility for both managing the anti-bullying policy and dealing with incidents of bullying, once the policy is established.

In **2011**, the Welsh Government built on this circular with **a series of anti-bullying materials** that provide guidance and practical solutions on preventing and responding to incidents of bullying in schools: *Respecting Others; Anti-bullying overview (Guidance document 050/2011)*. It includes a brief overview document and detailed guidance on the following five areas of bullying:

- Bullying around race, religion and culture
- Bullying around special educational needs and disabilities
- **Cyber-bullying**
- Homophobic bullying
- Sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying.

Guidance on Cyberbullying

As stated above, one of the Welsh Government's items of anti-bullying guidance deals specifically with cyberbullying (PDF 869KB). This is aimed at schools; local authorities; parents/carers, families; learners; school governors; social workers; health professionals; and voluntary organisations involved with schoolchildren.

The Welsh Government's 66 page guidance on cyberbullying includes the following sections:

- **Understanding** cyberbullying (including definitions, levels as of 2011, and forms it can take)
- The **law** relating to cyberbullying
- **Preventing** cyberbullying
- **Responding** to cyberbullying
- **Resources** and further reading.

Pages 33-34 provide guidance on promoting awareness and understanding about cyberbullying. Pages 43-45 gives guidance on how to support the person being cyberbullied. This includes the following key principles:

- Encouraging learners to seek help
- Reassuring them that they have done the right thing by telling someone
- Recognising that it must have been difficult for them to deal with
- Reiterating that no one has a right to do that to them
- Taking steps to ensure the school adopts a culture that does not tolerate cyberbullying, as this can also help to make the target of cyberbullying feel safe.

The guidance contains the following **'advice on online empowerment'**, which might be particularly relevant to the call for a strategy to build children and young people's emotional resilience to personal attacks online:

> It is important to advise the person being bullied **not to retaliate or return the message**. Replying to messages, particularly in anger, is probably just what the bully wants, and by not replying the bully may think that the target did not receive or see the message, or that they were not bothered by it. Instead, the person should keep the evidence and take it to their parent/carer or a member of staff.

> Advise the learner to think about the information they have in the public domain and where they go online. It is **important that learners are careful** about to whom they give their mobile phone number, and that they consider whether they should stay members of chatrooms, for example, where people are treating them badly.

> Advising a child to **change their contact details**, such as their instant messenger (IM) identity or mobile phone number, can be an effective way of stopping unwanted contact. However, it is important to be aware that some children may not want to do this, and will see this as a last resort for both practical and social reasons, and they may feel that they are being punished. (pages 43-44)

Estyn report, 2014

In June 2014, Estyn published a thematic report, *Action on bullying*. The report examined the **effectiveness of action taken by schools** to address bullying, with particular reference to bullying on the grounds of pupils' protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation). On cyberbullying, Estyn reported:

In most secondary schools, **pupils and staff are concerned about the rise in cyberbullying**, particularly in relation to the protected characteristics. Cyberbullying has **created new forms of bullying that are unfamiliar to some staff**. In the best practice, staff keep up-to-date with the technologies that pupils use and understand their potential for misuse inside and outside school. (para 10)

In most secondary schools, the rise in cyberbullying, as a **vehicle for anonymous bullying**, is a **concern for pupils and staff**. In general, schools find this type of bullying **difficult to manage**. It is also often **unreported**, because pupils feel too ashamed or embarrassed to talk about it. Often, by the time the school becomes aware of cyberbullying, it has been taking place for some time. Many pupils feel that once adults address individual issues, and talk about the victim's feelings openly, the situation improves. This often involves contacting police liaison officers who work with groups of pupils and remind them of the possible legal implications of cyberbullying. (para 28)

The increase in cyberbullying has created new forms of bullying that staff are often unfamiliar with. Many **staff are unaware of the software** used by pupils to communicate with one another through mobile phones and online activities, both inside and outside school. In 2012, a report by Ofcom ('Children and parents: Media use and attitudes in the nations') found that 80% of children aged 5-15 years of age use the internet at home. Technology is now a major part of the lives of children and young people and their knowledge of it has overtaken that of some parents and staff. In **the best practice, staff keep up-to-date with technology** and maintain an awareness of the software pupils use and its potential for misuse. (para 69)

The report included case studies of best practice illustrating how the best practice schools deal with bullying. It includes a particular **case study** of how the educational psychology service in Denbighshire supports staff, pupils and parents with tailored information about cyberbullying and how to prevent it.

Estyn's report also included an **anti-bullying checklist**. This includes:

- whether schools have a range of strategies to address cyberbullying;
- whether school staff keep up-to-date with new forms of bullying, such as cyberbullying; and
- whether schools address cyberbullying both inside and outside school.

As part of its recommendations, Estyn **recommended** that schools should 'ensure staff have a clear understanding of the extent and nature of bullying that may take place in school, including cyberbullying'.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.